

# Striped Skunk

## Description:

The skunk has probably the most widely-known defense system of any mammal, and boy does it smell! The jet spray of liquid musk is accurate within 10 feet and can spray up to 25 feet. Skunks have only recently become recognized as their own separate mammal family, Mephitidae. They were previously classified with weasels, and the two families are definitely closely related.

## I Know What A Skunk Looks Like!

Some basic characteristics belong to skunks. They have a small, triangular-shaped head, small ears, snout-like nose, short legs, and flat feet with five partially webbed toes. Their claws are longer on the front feet to help in digging shallow holes to search for grubs, insects, etc. The skull is distinct from other carnivores since it only has one molar on each side of the upper jaw and two on each side of the lower jaw.

The skunk's black and white coat tends to be visible even in the dark. Their flexible body allows them to arch their back, get into a U-shape with both head and rump facing an enemy, or even do a handstand. Their fluffy tail is used to warn intruders before shooting a long-lasting, smelly fluid from scent glands located in the anus.

The striped skunk is jet black with a small white stripe from its nose up to its forehead, and another in the shape of a "V" down the sides of its back to its long, fluffy tail. The striped skunk is about the size of a domestic cat.

Image from: Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History [http://web4.si.edu/mna/full\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=299](http://web4.si.edu/mna/full_image.cfm?image_id=299)

## Spots vs. Stripes

Spotted skunks are similar to striped skunks, but are less common in Idaho. Their white spots are usually in front of each ear and on the forehead, and there are four to six obvious white to pale yellow stripes that begin at the back of the head and continue down their black back, usually turning into different shaped larger spots. The black tail has a white tip and resembles a pom-pom. Spotted skunks are quite a bit smaller than the striped version, weighing only one to one and a half pounds.

## Habitat

Striped skunks are found in a variety of habitats, as long as there is plenty of food and shelter. Their main preference is semi-open country with a combination of woodlands and meadows, brushy areas, and bottomland woods. Frequently, they are also found in suburban areas. In Idaho, they prefer marshes, farmlands, and riparian areas. The striped skunk ranges throughout central Canada, down through the United States, and into northern Mexico.

## Varied Diet

Striped skunks are true omnivores with a varied diet including insects, small mammals, fish, eggs, grasses, leaves, buds, fruits, and carrion. Their favorite insects, such as grasshoppers, beetles and moth larvae make up about half of their summer diet. Striped skunks are opportunistic and their food intake changes depending on the time of year and the available resources.

## Mortality

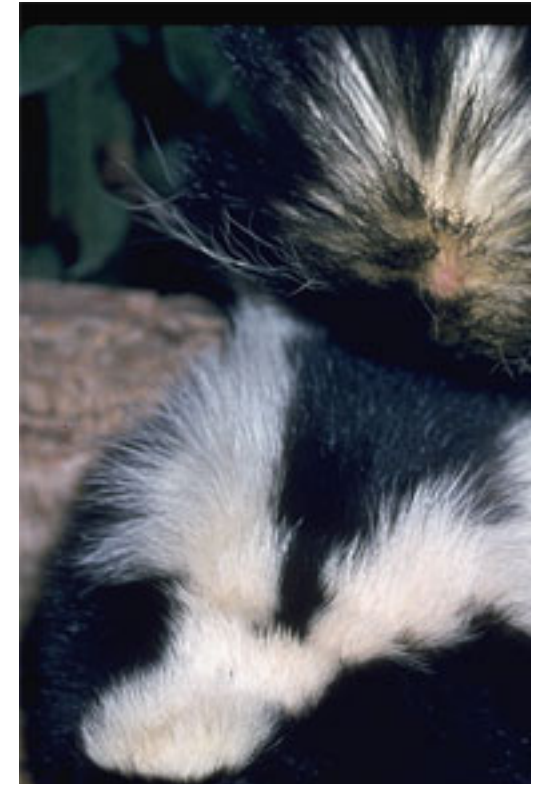
The primary predators of striped skunks are humans, but other species including red foxes, mountain lions, domestic dogs, and great horned owls have been known to kill skunks. Humans continue to trap and kill skunks because they are known to cause problems in neighborhoods such as digging holes, spraying dogs, and overturning garbage cans.

## Little Sprayers

Once a year, two to ten kittens are born in late April to early June. Although baby striped skunks are blind, deaf, and extremely immature at birth, they are able to spray within two to four weeks. They master the aim when their eyes open, usually at about 24 days old. Skunks try to give a warning (before they turn and spray) of stamping their front feet and sometimes standing on their front feet and arching their back with their tail in the air.

## Hibernation?

Although striped skunks sometimes sleep during extended periods of cold, snowy weather, they do not hibernate. Males seem to be more active in winter and females tend to share a winter den and huddle under rocks, logs, or buildings. Sometimes they excavate burrows or even use burrows abandoned by other mammals. Their dens are usually somewhat close to water but are always on a dry site. Striped skunks are mostly nocturnal (active in the evening) but are occasionally considered crepuscular (active in the early morning and early evening).



Striped Skunk  
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Footprint

*No Map*

Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Striped Skunk
2. **Scientific Name:** *Mephitis mephitis*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: 4 to 9 lbs.  
Length (body): 14 to 20 inches.  
Length (tail): 7 to 10 inches.
5. **Diet:** Insects, small mammals, fish, grasses, leaves, and carrion.
6. **Young:** 5-7 per year; called kittens.
7. **Lifespan:** 5 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Class: Mammalia  
Order: Carnivora  
Family: Mephitidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**